



## PREVIEW

# Typist Artist Pirate King

### Typist Artist Pirate King

Directed by: Carol Morley  
©: Passport Productions Ltd,  
British Film Institute  
International Sales:  
Metro International Entertainment  
Executive Producers: Jane Campion,  
Anne Sheehan, Reno Antoniadis,  
Mia Bays, Maria Logan, Oisín O'Neill,  
John Gleeson, Tyrone Walker-  
Hebborn, Norman Merry,  
Peter Hampden, Carol Morley  
Produced by: Cairo Cannon  
Producer: Ameenah Ayub Allen  
Line Producer: Sophie MacClancy  
Location Manager: Matthew Bowden  
Post-production Co-ordinator:  
Kevin Hasham  
1st Assistant Director: Malinda Kaur  
Script Supervisor: Bhairavi Patel  
Casting Director: Shaheen Baig  
Written by: Carol Morley  
Inspired by the life and times of:  
Audrey Amiss  
Director of Photography: Agnès Godard  
Visual Effects Supervisor: David Fowler  
Visual Effects by: LipSync Post  
Special Effects Supervisor: Rob Rowley  
Film Editor: Alex Mackie  
Production Designer: Janey Levick  
Art Director: Liz Simpson  
Costume Designer: Natalie Ward  
Hair and Make-up Designer:  
Claire Whiteley  
Music by: Carly Paradis  
Production Sound Mixer: Kieron Wolfson  
Re-recording Mixer: Sven Taits  
Stunt Co-ordinators: Martin Pemberton,  
Matt Da Silva  
Cast:  
Monica Dolan (*Audrey Amiss*)  
Kelly Macdonald (*Sandra Panza*)  
Gina McKee (*Dorothy*)  
Kieran Bew (*Gabe*)  
Judith Chandler (*Miss Moul*)  
Gary Bates (*vicar*)  
Paul Miller (*Jesus*)  
Anand Toora (*Jimmy Cragg*)  
Kya Brame (*Pouting Pamela*)  
Dawn Butler (*waitress*)  
James Jaysen Bryhan (*chef*)  
Matilda Firth (*magic girl*)  
Pauline Whitaker (*Miss Hunter*)  
Issam Al Ghussain (*John Lander Junior*)  
Neal Barry (*motorhome driver*)  
Christine Bottomley (*Joan*)  
Gavin Kitchen (*Policeman Da*)  
Joanne Allen (*Knitting Nelly*)  
Georgie Foley (*girl on beach*)  
Felicity Thompson (*girl on beach*)  
Christine Anderson (*beach cafe owner*)  
Paul Hamilton (*John*)  
UK 2023  
105 mins  
Digital

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+ Q&A with writer and director Carol Morley, cast members Monica Dolan, Gina McKee and Kieran Bew, producer Cairo Cannon, composer Carly Paradis and editor Alex Mackie

**SPOILER WARNING** The following notes give away the film's ending.

In 2015, filmmaker Carol Morley was working at the Wellcome Collection in London, having been awarded a Screenwriting Fellowship there. While at Wellcome, Morley heard about a woman who collected the packaging of everything she ate; intrigued, she asked to see this woman's archive, which was in storage and had not yet been catalogued.

The woman turned out to be Audrey Amiss. Born in Sunderland in 1933, she attended Sunderland Art School and, later, the Royal Academy in London, where she was praised for her use of colour. After being diagnosed with schizophrenia, her art career faltered, so to support herself, Amiss took a typist job at the Ministry of Labour and later Stockwell Unemployment Benefit Office. She continued to submit to galleries, which consistently turned her down. None of this deterred her, and the volume of her output is staggering. As well as cataloguing food wrappers, Amiss logged every letter she sent, and all the money she spent and received, in a series of journals and diaries. Her archive is made up of 80 boxes and 50,000 sketches and paintings; on her passport she wrote her occupation as 'Typist Artist Pirate King'. But Amiss did not consider herself an outsider artist, writing to her sister Dorothy: 'I was once in the tradition of social realism, also called the kitchen-sink school of painting. But I am now avant-garde and misunderstood.'

Morley – who made her name with *Dreams of a Life* (2011), about a young woman who died alone in her flat in north London, and *The Falling* (2014), a claustrophobic story of obsession and mass fainting – has often depicted outsiders in her work; *Dreams of a Life* demonstrated, too, her ability to sensitively reconstruct the life of a stranger. She tells me how, when she first got to see Amiss's archive, the work was completely 'raw and jumbled up', but she was determined to make a film about Amiss's life. The sheer volume of the archive proved a starting point. 'I fell in love with the work and was excited to have the privilege to excavate the life of somebody who deserved recognition and seemed to leave so much behind with intention,' says Morley. 'I also felt like she had chosen me for the task of making her film... I fell in love with her art because of how she took the everyday and studied and transformed it. I completely adored her scrapbooks and how she kept everyday objects and annotated them, because Audrey Amiss saw value in what others pass by.'

The film, *Typist Artist Pirate King*, is neither a typical biopic nor a documentary. Written and directed by Morley, with Monica Dolan in the title role, it's a re-imagining of Amiss's life. We see her alone in her flat in London – where her main contact with the world is shouting at neighbours who she claims are sexually assaulting her at night 'via remote control' – and with an endlessly patient, and entirely fictional, psychiatric nurse, Sandra Panza (Kelly Macdonald, excellent as the understated foil). Spurred on by the belief that she's 'not got long to live', Amiss fixates on entering an art competition back in her home town. She prevails on Sandra to drive her to Sunderland, which sets up a road movie structure within which the film can explore Audrey's past, her need for companionship and the daily reality of dealing with her mental health issues. The pair set off in Sandra's yellow electric car, 'Sunshine' – there's an immediate echo of the disharmonious pairing of John Candy and Steve Martin in *Planes, Trains and Automobiles* (1987). (Later, in another cinematic nod, the women pose for passport photos, and Sandra likens them to Thelma and Louise.) When Audrey causes the car to crash, they're forced to take a coach.

The film's episodic structure allows the audience to see how Amiss navigated the world. In real life, she was often convinced that strangers were people from her past, so Morley threads the journey with figures familiar to Amiss: at a yoga class, she believes the teacher is her old headmistress; in a hotel, after trashing the reception area, she mistakes the policeman who comes to gently chastise her for her father. These scenes don't just serve as a historical window into Amiss's life – they are deeply empathetic. It's a theme that recurs throughout Morley's work: the importance of putting ourselves in the place of those

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whose lives differ from or are more complicated than our own. We are brought to the first psychiatric hospital Amiss stayed in, and stop at an Anglo-Saxon battle re-enactment, where she is crowned queen. Such incremental moments, thanks to Morley's subtle handling of chronology, show that Amiss's past was very much her present, with time coalescing in an often chaotic way.

The film shows Amiss in all her complicatedness – from her humour and talent to her public outbursts and accusatory -meltdowns. In her journals, Amiss detailed her illness, describing herself as a 'Mental Health Survivor'. Morley is careful not to pin a diagnosis on her, and was mindful of the difficulties of portraying a real person with an already stigmatised illness.

'It's difficult to make a portrait of anyone, because you want to create a portrait that they would recognise. I wanted to make the film not "about her" but "of her", so to make a film that honoured her brilliant and delicate use of colour. Because Audrey left so much behind, I felt very equipped to tell her story. It was just about figuring out how I could put that into motion and navigate areas of mental health. It seemed to me I was creating a portrait of Audrey and that mental health was one aspect – and so if I stuck closely to her world-view she would show me the way.'

With this kind of subject matter, there are tough scenes, but to Morley's credit – and thanks to a superb, feverish performance by Dolan – we see another side to Amiss: arch and wilful, but funny too. In the hotel Amiss trashes, she shares a room with Sandra, indicating that she's welcome to use Amiss's leftover bathwater, calmly noting that she has peed in it. When she eats a Quaver, the artist in her marvels at how it 'catches the light'. Throughout the film, the light and shade of her personality are expertly balanced, and Amiss is compelling company throughout.

Morley was keen to have the blessing of Amiss's family before starting this project. 'As soon as I knew I wanted to make a film about Audrey, I met with her nephew and niece – Steve Weatherell and Kate Tunnicliff – who had inherited Audrey's collection. Later, I got an email from Audrey's sister Dorothy, who said, "It's time I came on board." I travelled to Wetherby to meet her and her husband John, and when I finished the screenplay I sent it to Dorothy, who wrote back saying, "Thank you for giving me my Audrey back."'

Dorothy (played by Gina McKee) is presented on screen as a key absence in Amiss's life. The sisters have become estranged, largely because of Audrey's unpredictable behaviour. In real life, they remained estranged, but in the film Morley brought them together. 'I wanted the film to be about reconciliation – for everything in life. I suppose I wanted to do that for Dorothy and Audrey.' Dorothy died as the film was being edited and did not see the finished version, but she visited the set and saw Audrey's flat. The film is dedicated to her.

The final scenes offer some closure, after this picaresque journey. Amiss wrote that a friend once compared her to Don Quixote – the name Sandra Panza is surely a nod to this. The film's fragmentary nature and frantic pacing mimic Amiss's experience of the world – Agnès Godard's cinematography keeps pace impressively. Carly Paradis's score instinctively knows when to recede and when to be declarative. Morley wanted the film to have Audrey and her art at its centre, not the illness she grappled with, and the viewer is reminded of this through regular appearances of her artworks. The title of one work sums her up brilliantly: Two Girls Talking, no time to draw the second girl.

In many ways, *Typist Artist Pirate King* is rooted in absences and denial: the care Audrey didn't get, the life she might have had with recognition of her talent. It highlights a broader societal issue: how successive governments have underfunded mental health provision, and how easily patients without full-time carers or close family can become isolated. There's a subtle but unmistakable swipe at an art world dismissive of working-class artists, especially if they happen to be women or unwell. Amiss's art and her fastidious cataloguing were a lifeline, an anchor that created certainty in a life often thwarted by conflicting realities. The film's title embodies this: the life and roles she actually lived and the ones she dreamed of. Myriad and complex, Amiss finally gets her due in this touching, compassionate film.

Sinéad Gleeson, *Sight and Sound*, October 2023